

# MEMORANDUM ON THE CONSIDERATION OF HEREDITY AT THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH.<sup>(1)</sup>

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## GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS.

IN a memorandum by the Chief Medical Officer of the Ministry of Health, "Eugenics and the principles of sound breeding" are placed first in order amongst the principal elements of a National policy of Preventive Medicine. No such recognition of this subject has ever before been given by a public body, and for the first time there seems to be a chance that racial questions will receive adequate attention at the hands of the Government.

Certain peculiar difficulties have to be faced in connection with the practical application of Eugenic principles, which must be clearly recognised in order, as far as possible, to obviate them. More than two thousand years ago Plato declared that "God proclaims as a first principle to the rulers, and above all else, that there is nothing which they should so anxiously guard, or of which they are to be such good guardians, as of the purity of the race": and the reason why this philosopher, who perhaps influenced thought more than any other human being, failed almost entirely to impress this truth on mankind, can best be ascertained by a study of the stumbling blocks which have impeded racial progress during all these centuries. These may be divided under the three following headings:—

A FALSE APPLICATION OF EUGENIC PRINCIPLES LEADING TO PROPOSALS RUNNING COUNTER TO GENERALLY ACCEPTED MORAL CODES.	(1.) Plato failed to perceive that monogamy and family life may be defended, not only on religious grounds, but also by pointing to the evil social, material and racial effects of polygamy and promiscuity; and he was consequently led to advocate reforms which would have been harmful both as regards immediate and racial consequences. The moral aspects of Eugenic reforms must always take the leading place when they are under discussion.
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<sup>(1)</sup> In forwarding this Memorandum to the Ministry of Health it was stated that it was written by Major Darwin, but that it had received the general approval of the Council, though on a few points—birth limitation, for example—opinions were not quite unanimous.

THE PREJUDICES AROUSED  
AGAINST THIS SUBJECT BY THE  
ADVOCACY OF UNWISE  
MEASURES BY CRANKS.

(2.) Any new method of reform is sure to attract the attention of cranks, and for psychological reasons this is especially likely to be the case with subjects in any way connected with sex.

THE DIFFICULTY OF  
ATTRACTING ATTEN-  
TION TO MATTERS  
ONLY AFFECTING  
THE WELFARE OF  
POSTERITY.

(3.) This is the main and most enduring obstacle to racial progress, and to it especial attention must be given.

The factors which affect human beings may be divided into (1) those which are alterable during the life-time of each individual, and (2) those which are unalterable; and

this is, in fact, the division between environment and heredity. Persons endowed with a bad constitution may be greatly benefited by a good environment; but that good environment cannot alter the constitution with which they were originally endowed at birth. Moreover, the improvements to human qualities due to improved environment, in the opinion of practically every English scientific expert, either are not at all passed on to posterity so as to affect the individual at birth, or affect the inborn qualities of future generations so slowly that their results only become manifest after many generations, and may therefore be neglected by the politician from the racial aspect. To utilise the agency of heredity is, therefore, the only practical means of beneficially affecting posterity in regard to their inborn qualities; whilst in this way it is impossible to produce any direct beneficial effect on any living human being. The desire to do immediate good is of course highly commendable; but it is a desire which experience proves is apt to make the social worker neglect racial reforms and drift away to other fields in which more rapid results are attainable, and which are, therefore, more interesting. Education alone can mitigate this difficulty.

Medical men are in some respects especially likely to be tempted to push heredity on one side. A study of Eugenics does but reinforce the common sense view that there are limits beyond which it is impossible to go in affecting the mental and physical well-being of the individual. The medical man should, however, not pay too much attention to these limitations; or, at all events, it is better that he should imagine that a cure is possible when really it is impossible, than that he should make a mistake in the opposite direction. He should in many respects act as if the unalterable heredity factor did not stand in his way, and he is thus often tempted to neglect that factor altogether. Moreover, psychology teaches us that the mind is so constituted that there is a tendency to exaggerate the relative importance of those subjects to which the attention is most often devoted. The medical man is constantly devoting his most earnest attention to curative and preventive treatment, and thus a natural tendency is produced to exaggerate the importance of these immediately alterable factors in comparison with the immediately unalterable factor of heredity.

## CONSIDERATION OF HEREDITY AT MINISTRY OF HEALTH. 107

This same psychological influence which tends to result in a neglect of the factors only affecting posterity, will also be felt by all social workers who are nobly throwing their whole endeavours into the struggle against immediate suffering. Their desire to neglect heredity is indeed frequently visible, except in those who have had a sound biological education. But of all classes, politicians are least likely to be drawn to the study of eugenics; for posterity, including all those who might be affected by racial reforms, have now no votes. Politicians, medical men and social workers are probably the types which will be most influential at the Ministry of Health, and the influences likely to tempt them to pay too little attention to eugenics should be held in view.

### RESEARCH.

As it has been wisely enacted that the initiation of research shall be one of the primary duties of the Minister of Health, and as it now appears that questions connected with heredity are to be included within his purview, the following observations are submitted for consideration.

**BIRTH AND DEATH RATES.** In all investigations connected with birth and death rates it is especially necessary that heredity should be kept in view, or false conclusions will be drawn. Care must be taken to state the problems accurately. For example, to ask to what extent the death rate is affected by heredity is to pose an almost meaningless question, or at all events one not easily interpreted. What would have been the death rate of the existing population if it had been placed in a perfect environment is at all events a question to which a meaning can be attached, even though it may be impossible to answer it with accuracy.

Investigations such as those undertaken by the Galton Laboratory, which aim at ascertaining the associations between different social conditions and the birth and death rates, are of the highest importance, and should be encouraged in every way. Whilst the greatest mass of information will probably be obtainable in the future from the Registrar-General's Department, independent investigation at Universities and other institutions are likely to remain the most fruitful source of scientific discovery.

**DISEASE.** In considering the hereditary effects of disease, the now disputed questions concerning racial poisons (or the permanent effects of certain substances on the germ plasm) and the inheritance of acquired characters (or the influence on the germ plasm of physical changes in parents due to the environments to which they have been exposed) must be considered; though it now seems that other hereditary problems are of greater importance from the Eugenic point of view. The effects of the transmission from parent to offspring

of poisonous substances (such as alcohol), or of living germs (such as those of syphilis) form entirely distinct subjects of enquiry, which, according to some Eugenists, do not, however important, come within the scope of Eugenics proper. To ascertain the true hereditary correlations of innate tendencies to disease, as distinguished from parental correlations resulting from similarity of environment, form the most important lines of enquiry in regard to racial progress or deterioration.

INDUSTRIAL DISEASES. In the study of these diseases, the distinction between ailments which could have been increased by bad conditions and the defects which are either due to unalterable constitutional causes, or could only be slightly affected by local conditions, should be noted as clearly as possible. This would assist in ascertaining to what extent the incidence of diseases in certain industries is due to persons with inferior constitutions being driven to adopt the less attractive callings.

INSURANCE STATISTICS. By means of such statistics some attempt should be made to ascertain the amount by which the cost of insurance could conceivably be diminished by improved environment, or, on the other hand, by improved hereditary constitutions.

SYPHILIS. This disease requires especial attention in regard to the above-mentioned enquiries concerning so-called racial poisons. Efforts should be made to ascertain whether the children of *congenitally* syphilitic parents themselves show symptoms of congenital syphilis more often than might be accounted for by fresh infections in the parents; also whether the congenitally diseased *infant* is ever quite free from the presence of the *spirochæta pallida*.

INSANITY. Systematic enquiries under the control of experts, and aided by "field workers," into the heredity of insanity of different types might be made to add greatly to our existing knowledge of this subject. Comparisons between the children of syphilitic and non-syphilitic parents would be useful in connection with the problems mentioned above in connection with disease, especially in indicating what types of insanity are promoted by parental syphilis.

MENTAL DEFECTS. In all reforms in regard to mental defect, but especially in regard to feeble-mindedness, the prevention or discouragement of parenthood should be a primary aim. In this connection similar investigation to those above-mentioned in regard to insanity should be vigorously pursued. Especial endeavours should be made to ascertain to what extent bad environments are truly causative agents of mental defect, and to what extent they are merely selective agents of inferior types.

## CONSIDERATION OF HEREDITY AT MINISTRY OF HEALTH. 109

**ALCOHOL.** Hereditary tendencies to drunkenness should be studied with care. Further experiments on animals are desirable, especially in order to ascertain whether the "hereditary" effects alleged to be produced by alcoholic poisoning are affected by differences in the amount of alcohol administered, and also whether the transmission of the defects in subsequent generations does, or does not, follow the ordinary laws of heredity.

**MARRIAGE CERTIFICATES.** An enquiry should be instituted to ascertain the practicability of, and the advantages to be obtained by, the production of health certificates before marriage being made compulsory, with or without penalties for false statements.

### REFORMS NEEDED.

The lines of research above-mentioned all point to reform in various directions in the more or less distant future. In certain directions reforms should be immediately adopted.

**BIRTH RATE.** A number of reforms are now under consideration which would affect the birth rate. It is the duty of the Government to consider to what extent such reforms would affect the birth rate differentially as regards different types of human beings.

**BIRTH LIMITATION.** In the interests of posterity it is most desirable that parents should now limit the size of their families by any means held by them to be right (provided such means are not injurious to health, nor, like abortion, an offence against public morals) to such an extent that the children could be brought up as efficient citizens and without deterioration in the standards of their civilization; and that parents should not limit the size of the family for any other reasons except on account of definite hereditary defects, or to secure an adequate interval between births. The anticipated economic effects of such a policy are obvious. As to the racial effects, if in future those incapable of earning good wages, and consequently badly paid, were to have smaller families than at present, whilst the more capable and consequently better paid workers were to leave more descendants behind them, some tendency would thus be produced to promote the appearance in the coming generations of all those natural qualities which would render the winning of a given wage, or the production of a given output, less arduous to the worker than at present. These are mainly moral reforms outside the scope of the Ministry of Health; but questions connected with birth intervals and the physical effects of birth limitation do involve medical considerations; whilst the research encouraged by the Ministry might greatly facilitate decisions in regard to hereditary tendencies.

**MEDICAL CURRICULUM.** It is desirable that a more thorough study of heredity should be included in the biological course of every medical curriculum, together with some general instruction as regards its application to human beings.

**PRISONS AND WORKHOUSES.** Careful enquiries should always be made by medical experts as to the mental qualities of young persons accused of crime and of all inmates of prisons and workhouses; and in selected cases investigations should also be made into the heredity of criminals and others on the lines initiated by the late Dr. Goring. The Ministry of Health might help to promote much needed reforms in the direction of lengthening the detention of habitual criminals and tramps, punishment not being the object to be held in view.

**MENTAL DEFECTIVES.** Further accommodation for mental defectives is urgently needed, especially for the adult feeble in mind, if the matter be regarded from the Eugenic point of view.

**SURVEY OF THE NATION.** A national survey of the people, which is believed to be in contemplation, should be quickly instituted. The aim should be to keep such a record of the measurements of the physical and mental qualities of the people as to make comparison with similar surveys made at wide intervals of time as reliable an indication as possible of racial progress or deterioration.

**INSPECTION OF ALIENS.** The exclusion and expulsion of undesirable aliens should be more strictly enforced, and the greatest attention should be paid to constitution defects and to such diseases as have been proved to be favoured by such hereditary defects.

**GENERAL REGISTRATION.** A large number of separate registers of the population for various purposes are now in existence, and it is desirable that they should be co-ordinated as far as possible under the Ministry of Health. From the racial point of view the ideal to be gradually aimed at should be that each individual should at birth be allotted a registered number (or letters); that a corresponding series of index cards should be kept; and that in many ways it should be made advantageous to the individual to be able to quote his register number and therefore to remember it. On each card should be recorded the register number of both parents, so that ultimately pedigrees would thus be traceable. On the cards should also be recorded the date of the marriage of the individual, the register number of wife births of children, crimes and imprisonment, admissions to lunatic asylums and other institutions, and, if possible, diseases. The public should be able to obtain, on payment of a small fee, certain information—the more the better from the racial point of view—and special facilities for enquiry might be given in view of a contemplated marriage of the individual in question.

## CONSIDERATION OF HEREDITY AT MINISTRY OF HEALTH. III

### ORGANISATION.

The foregoing suggestions concerning reform and research indicate that every department under the Minister of Health ought to take questions of heredity into consideration. It was seen also that these questions are especially likely to receive inadequate attention. It follows, therefore, that if racial problems do not receive separate consideration in framing the organisation of the Ministry of Health, many reforms which would greatly benefit future generations will be neglected. The following suggestions are made in some detail as the simplest way of indicating points which seem to require consideration.

As every department under the Minister of Health should take problems of heredity into account, it would probably not be desirable to entrust this subject to the care of a separate section of the Ministry. In the Act establishing this Ministry, it is enacted that Consultative Councils for giving advice and assistance to the Minister may be established, and the formation of such a Council to deal with heredity would seem best to meet the needs of the situation.

The composition of such a Council of Heredity would need careful consideration. The political element and all the different departments of the Ministry should obviously be represented; and the Board of Control and the Registrar-General's Department should be in especially close touch with it. As to members appointed from outside the Ministry, these should include some leading expert or experts in biological science, possibly nominated by the Royal Society for a limited term of years; also one or more medical men from outside the Ministry, who had given the problems of heredity special consideration; and perhaps someone who would keep the moral aspects of racial questions especially in view. If the outside members were to receive salaries under Civil Service conditions, that is ensuring retirement at a given age, it would be advantageous; because learned Societies and other nominating bodies would be apt to nominate persons who have ceased to be in possession of their original powers of initiative, but who are still considered to be capable of attending at Council meetings.

If some such body were appointed, which would always be in close touch with modern scientific thought and with political possibilities; *if no other duties whatever besides the consideration of hereditary problems were assigned to it*; if it were to meet at regular stated intervals; and if it were to become the custom of the Ministry of Health to give this body an opportunity of commenting on all projects of reform before being submitted to Parliament or brought into operation, its establishment might prove to be the greatest practical step in advance yet made in regard to racial questions.

The policy of *laissez faire* has been as a fact largely abandoned in nearly every field. To let racial questions take care of themselves is certainly a disastrous survival of the old policy.